Woman in China

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LIFE is a stern and hard thing in China for both men and women; but, as in all places where Christ is not, the burdens heaviest to bear are put upon the weakest. The Chinese woman does not walk in the street with her husband; she does not eat with him, but takes what is left after the men of the family have finished their meal; she has no legal right to anything whatever, apart from her male relatives. Yet her condition is, in some respects, better than that of her sisters in neighboring countries. She is not the sufferer by any system of caste, as in India; she is not shut up in a harem, as in Turkey; she is not denied the possession of a soul, and the religious privileges of men, as in Burmah; she is not degraded by polyandry, as in Thibet; she is not in a climate which keeps her bare and lazy, like those in Siam; her virtue is as carefully guarded and as highly esteemed as in any country in the world. In character and ability, she is superior to all other Asiatic women, except the Japanese. Female children and elderly women associate with those of the

other sex on terms of apparent equality. Girls and young women, though not kept in such seclusion as in India, do not go out alone, nor appear before male visitors. The customs concerning young ladies are French rather than American. The amount of freedom that may be wise in social intercourse between the sexes must depend on the degree of purity in each. The Chinese have done the best they could under their circumstances, and give woman all the social freedom that is discreet for her in a land where the cleansing and controlling power of Christian principle is unknown.

In a country where extortion is the chief use of office, and fear of it the main spur to obedience, neither women nor men claim political rights. But there is no law nor prejudice to prevent women following any occupation in which they may be skilled.

The attainments of women in literature are much lauded and respected. Practically, such attainments are uncommon; but historians refer with pride to the scholarship of a few, and novelists are fond of representing their heroines as skilled in writing both poetry and prose. Knowing writers about China tell us eloquently and truly of the system of examination and promotion of scholars, and say, or lead one to infer, that education is nearly universal. In almost every village in this region there is a private school in which a few boys are taught to read; but the proportion of those taught is very small, and girls' schools are wholly un-

known. Of the men here, not more than one in a hundred can read; and, of women, I have seen none outside the Christian mission schools who could read, except those despised little girls taught to read as actors in theatres.

For acts of heroism or exalted virtue, a woman may, like men, have an honorary portal erected for her with the emperor's sanction. She may even aspire to deification, as many of the richest and most frequented temples are those of the Queen of Heaven, the Protector of Sailors, and other goddesses who were once earthly women.

In one thing, she is exceptionally blessed. She has inherited from former generations a style of dress at once modest, economical, healthful, and becoming. It covers the whole person; and, unlike many western costumes, which make more noticeable what they profess to conceal, it shields the contour of the body from observation. It takes but eight yards of yard-wide cloth for a complete set of winter garments; and there is no waste in cutting, and no false nor unnecessary appendages. Its truest economy, however, is in the saving of mental worry, which comes from always cutting by the same pattern, and the obviation of all need of fitting. It allows unrestricted play to every muscle, is of the same thickness over the whole body, is not in the way when at work, and has little weight, while it has all needful warmth. Many women look handsome in it who are ugly in western attire. This

desirable dress may make us less sorry that half the women in the world are Chinese. Careful consideration of the effects of modes of dress in both countries have made me sure that the custom of binding the feet hampers the body and soul of Chinese women less than the changing and following of fashions does that of American Women. This healthful dress may be a reason why, with floorless and windowless houses, poor food, and unwholesome surroundings, Chinese women live to very old age. The custom of binding the feet is not so universal in China as is generally supposed. In some villages, almost every woman has her feet compressed. In other places, and often through wide regions, especially in the agricultural districts, all the women have naturally formed feet.

The greatest physical danger that ever besets a Chinese woman is likely to occur at her birth. If the mother has not yet borne sons, she often destroys all her female offspring, that she may hope the sooner to have a boy. If she has sons, she will allow two, or perhaps three, girls to live; but beyond that number she smothers them at their birth. If she did not do this, not only her husband and her whole family, but her neighbors and acquaintances, would curse her for bringing useless mouths where there is not food enough for those who can work to earn it. Great numbers of men go abroad as coolies and laborers in other countries, and never return; and, as respectable women never go, the

emigration of so many men tends to cause a surplus of women. But, more than all else, the fact that girls are after marriage entirely lost to their parents, and make no offerings at their own ancestral graves for the support of their parents' spirits after death, causes the advent of more girls than enough to help the mother in household labors to be considered a calamity to the family. In the north, infanticide is said to be uncommon. It is supposed to be practised most in this and the adjoining maritime provinces, where emigration is more constant, and the land more sterile, than in other parts of China. Of ten women now learning to read in my Bible-class here, five have among them destroyed twelve daughters, and five have destroyed none because they have each borne less than three. This was before they became Christians, of course.

The Chinese do not kill female children except at birth. If they are then allowed to live, and it afterwards becomes impossible to keep them, they are sold or given away. Some months ago, in walking near a neighboring village, I met a man carrying two large covered baskets on the ends of a pole over his shoulder. Cries were issuing from the baskets, and I made him stop and let me see what was in them. There were three babies, one in one basket and two in the other, all lying on their backs, blue with cold, and hungry and crying with all their small might. The man was a baby-merchant, and had taken out six in the

morning to sell, and, having disposed of half his stock, was returning home at nightfall with the remainder. He said, if I would take them all, he would sell me the lot very cheap. I suppose he would have considered a dollar apiece a sufficient compensation.

Christianity in the hearts of the parents is the only effectual remedy for these terrible ills. These orphans, by the will of man, are sometimes placed, as a work of merit, in Buddhist nunneries, where they wear a peculiar dress, shave their heads, chant prayers to the idols, go in companies begging, and take care of the infant nuns who are to come after them. Sometimes they are bought by those who have no daughters, or to be brought up as wives for sons, or as domestic servants; and often they are bought and reared for the worst of purposes. To save the expenses of betrothal, a mother sometimes buys or accepts from a friend an infant girl, whom she rears as a wife for her son. Several times, I have seen a middle-aged woman dandling a little girl, and been told that the child was to be her son's or grandson's wife.

Having decided to keep a daughter, the mother cares for her as well as she can. She feeds her with such food as she herself has, and, as soon as her age permits, teaches her to spin and weave and sew, and cook rice, and lays on her small shoulders rather heavy burdens in the care of other children.

Children are sometimes betrothed in infancy;

but, as betrothal is as binding as marriage, the Chinese have learned wisdom, and usually defer it until a year or two before marriage, which is when the girl is about fifteen. Lately, just after I had left one of our out-stations, a girl nineteen years old came with her grandfather to our chapel, and said she hoped to find me there, and that I would take her to be my daughter. She was betrothed in infancy to a youth who has since developed incurable dropsy, and is useless and horrible. Her parents are not willing that she should marry him, and his parents will not allow her to marry any one else; and to remain unmarried is, for a woman, a thing unknown in Chinese customs. Her mother urged her to kill herself; but not being willing to do that, and there being no place for her in Chinese ways of life, she came to see if there was any place for her in our way of life. I sent for her to come to me here; but her father feared she would become a Christian, and would not let her come.

The proposals of betrothal are made by the parents of the young man, whose business it is to know the history and expectations of the marriageable people of the neighborhood. The selection of the bride is sometimes left wholly to the go-between; and sometimes she simply carries messages between the parents, who have their plans previously formed. The betrothal is often made without either of the parties most concerned being aware of what is being done for them; and the bride is brought to her

husband's home without ever having seen him or any member of his family. Having arrived there, she is at once incorporated in her father-in-law's household, and thenceforth has little association with her own kin. Her happiness depends more on the character of her mother-in-law than on that of her husband; for by her husband's mother and grandmother she is wholly ruled. She is domestic servant for the whole household, and especial waiting-maid to her mother-in-law. Sometimes very strong attachments are formed between these women. I have seen a woman weep at being separated for a time from her mother-in-law, and express no pleasure when told that her husband was coming to see her. On the other hand, there is often tyranny on the part of the elder woman, and dislike on that of the younger one.

The wife may be divorced for scolding, barrenness, lasciviousness, leprosy, disobedience to her husband's parents, and thieving; but all these causes are null when her parents are not alive to receive her back again. A man cannot have more than one wife; but he may take concubines, whose children are legally subject to the authority of the wife, as Bilhah's were to Rachel; and public opinion does not justify the taking of a concubine, except when the wife has borne no sons. In this region, where nearly all the people are very poor, it is very uncommon for a man to have more than one wife.

As long as a woman is childless, she *serves:*

as soon as she becomes a mother, she begins to rule; and her dominion increases perpetually with the number of her descendants and the diminution of her elders. Married at fifteen, she is often a great-grandmother at sixty, and the head of a household of some dozens of persons.

So much the welfare of the wife depends on her having sons that it is not strange that they are her greatest desire, her chief pride, and that for which she will sacrifice all else. Her daughters leave her, and become legally and truly an integral part of another family forever. For domestic service, care in sickness, help in old age, and offerings for the sustenance of her spirit after death, she must rely on her son's wife; while her own daughter performs these services for some one else. The prosperity of a Chinese household is in proportion to the number of sons.

There once came to my knowledge a case illustrating well the dreadful effect of the Chinese social and religious systems. A couple had been married many years, and had no children. The wife made many prayers and offerings in a neighboring temple, and promised the idol a splendid feast if she should have a son. At last, her desire was fulfilled; and the delighted couple wished to pay their vow to the idol. But they were very poor, having only a small piece of land on which they lived, and from which they got their whole support. They considered much what they should do.

They had no rich friends from whom to borrow, no handsome clothes that they could pawn, and no way of earning more than their daily bread; yet the idol must be satisfied, or it might do them and the child great harm. There was only the land on which was their whole dependence. After much distressed debate, in which fear of the idol prevailed, they sold the land for thirty dollars, and spread a thanksgiving feast before the god. Then they struggled on, not hopelessly, because they had a son, and need not go hungry nor naked in their old age in this world, nor in the world of spirits. By working at odd jobs here and there, they managed to keep themselves alive, and feed the child. When the boy was eight years old, another son was born to them Again, the idol must have a thank-offering; but this time they had no land to sell, and were in the last stages of poverty. Their only valuable possession was their eight-year-old boy. He was bright and handsome, and a rich, childless man wanted him for his own. After much discussion, agitated by fear of the idol, and desire for its beneficent influence on the babe, and all other means of getting money failing, they sold the boy for fifteen dollars, and again made a feast before the god. The eldest boy gone, and the feast over, the baby took small-pox and died. The raving, despairing mother carried the corpse, and bound it on the breast of the idol, saying: "You have eaten our land; you have eaten our house; you have eaten our

pots and pans; you have eaten our eight-year old boy: all we ever had has gone into your maw. *Now* eat *this!*"

The Chinese social, civil, and religious customs and opinions are so linked together that. when one is changed, all must change together. Nothing less than divine help can do them effectual good. Cleansed by the blood of Christ, their faculties readjusted by the Holy Spirit, the truth of God vitalizing their souls, all their oppressive and wicked ways will be altered.

There is no practical bar to their conversion. The country is open, and at peace. The climate is healthful, and cool enough to permit much more vigorous work than in mission-fields further south; to learn the language is feasible; to be the means of saving thousands of souls in one human lifetime is possible. There are now over thirty Protestant single missionary ladies working in China. One of the reasons why female missionary work may be effective here is that native women may be trained to act as Bible-women, and thus one foreign missionary may multiply her influence endlessly. Women over forty may travel and speak the gospel freely to those of their own sex, and often to men. Many of the Christian women have first heard the gospel from men; and many of the men have been led into the Church by women. Here is the most vast and grand of foreign mission-fields for women, as well as men. The population is so dense that multi-

tudes come within the reach of one missionary; yet the number of missionaries is so small, in proportion to the extent of the field, that comparatively few of the great mass of Chinese have ever had an opportunity to hear the gospel. It is practicable for the Woman's Missionary Society to cause thousands to be saved, who will not be but through their effort. Christ has ordained that the water of life shall be dispensed by human hands. Is it not worth while, for his sake, to deny ourselves somewhat, that these our sisters, dying of thirst, may taste some drops from the cup of salvation, which, whether we ourselves drink it or not, is overflowing in our hands? Two hundred millions of Chinese women ask for this draught from YOUR hands; and *will you give it?*

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